Fort Myers Beach a paradise lost

The Hamilton Spectator (Ontario) Online

July 28, 2023 Friday

Copyright 2023 Toronto Star Newspapers Ltd. All Rights Reserved

Section: OPINION

Length: 649 words

Byline: Dave Davis

Body

"Oh, my God," my wife said, under her breath, not once but dozens of times.

Two weeks ago, we were driving along Fort Myers Beach, roughly nine months after it was hit by hurricane Ian. No, not hit; "hit" implies a glancing blow, a side-swipe; better to say overwhelmed. On our drive, we saw dozens and dozens of homes, virtually every one of them - some in the several million-dollar range, some under a hundred thousand, devastated. Mounds of debris. Many lots cleared entirely, empty of all but the pylons the houses sat on. Restaurants - all gone. Churches, too. Plazas and shops, gone. Many condominiums, some as high as 20 stories, look fine a block away as though residents could step right back into them. Up close, we saw right through them, from the road to the beach; residents wouldn't be returning any time soon. I stopped and took a picture at the north end of the island, a kind of honky-tonk downtown, previously filled with colourful T-shirt and surf shops, little cafés, ice-cream and pizza places, and a giant pier reaching out into the Gulf. All gone, the gift of hurricane Ian. Tears crept into my eyes, clouding the picture.

We are 35-year owners of a tiny slice of this former paradise, not able to visit it since the hurricane.

You may not recall the event that devastated our beach. To be fair, we've had more than our share of outside-normal climate events this year - drought, floods, forest fires, record-breaking temperatures, and Ian - a Category Five hurricane, the third-costliest weather disaster on record (over 100 billion dollars and counting) and the deadliest hurricane to strike Florida since 1935.

On Sept. 28 last year, residents along the Gulf Coast were advised that Ian was headed toward the southwestern reaches of Florida. They had days to watch it as it made its way across the Atlantic from West Africa, striking Cuba among other locations. Some models had Fort Myers Beach, a seven-mile-long island just off the coast, as its target. Many models did not, and many residents decided to ride it out. The upstairs neighbour in our condo was one of them. He video-recorded the landfall of the hurricane as it inundated the entire island, drowning it in seven feet-plus of water, tossing boats and cars like toddlers' toys, bending the palm trees in two, ripping out foundations and plantings and trees, breaking over seawalls, smashing through windows and walls.

Two weeks' later and near the end of our holiday, I drive up the island, on my own this time. I notice some things that, overwhelmed initially, we didn't notice on our first drive. Perhaps my cheerier, post-holiday mood allows me to see them. Construction workers are everywhere. A couple hotels have reopened; another one, brand new, will soon accept customers. Bulldozers have cleared much of the debris - the beach is almost pristine, many houses gone. A

handful of food trucks replace the little restaurants and cafés. I see a giant "FOOD PANTRY" sign, marking a huge tent, located where a church once sat. And there's this: as I drive by a severely damaged house, I notice a woman emerging from her swimming pool, towelling off. A small bulldozer, manned I think by her husband, is clearing the property only feet away from her. She waves and smiles, as though saying, "We'll get there, just give us time."

For a second, the pessimist in me thinks she doesn't know what's ahead for her, or for that matter, the planet. The optimist in me sees resilience and hope in the wave and the restoration, a symbolic hope in the meaning of nine months. On this day, in this moment, the optimist wins.

Dave Davis is a retired family doc and writer. His novels, *A Potters Tale* and *The Last Immortal* have won international awards. His latest, *Two Page Tales,* cowrote with the Writers in Paradise, is an anthology of short stories. All of them are available on Amazon. Visit drdavedavis.com

Load-Date: July 28, 2023

End of Document